



West Valley VIEW

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Gym germs

Why good hygiene is critical in fitness centers

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Be careful what you pick up at the gym. If you don't take appropriate precautions, you can go home with much more than a fit figure.

"If someone goes to the gym with an infection, everyone else can get it, and that does happen," said Dr. John Po, infectious disease specialist at Banner Estrella Medical Center.

Proper hygiene at fitness centers is critical in maintaining community health where people share the equipment. It is of utmost importance that equipment is cleaned with antibacterial cleaner between each use.

"It's a facility shared by many people and when you workout, you work up a sweat and the equipment is in contact with your skin and clothing," Dr. Po said.

You can go home from the gym with much more than the common cold. Bacteria and fungus transmitted in fitness centers can create nasty consequences.

Methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) infection is spread by open wounds. It's caused by a strain of staph bacteria that has become resistant to commonly used antibiotics.

"You can get staph or strep infections from your hands on the equipment and community-acquired MRSA. One potential infection you can get is things like planter's warts and things on your feet like fungal infections," Dr. Po said.

There are simple steps to preventing the spread of infections that make the gym a safer place. The doctor recommended wearing shoes at all times, including in changing rooms and shower areas and always wearing clean clothing.

"Don't toss things in the bottom of a locker and use them again. Then you just make a nice breeding ground for bacteria," he said.

Anyone with a wound or known illness should stay out of the gym until they are healed, as well.

"If you have any open cuts, sores or you are sick, don't go to the gym. You may have a cut and not realize it is infected," Dr. Po said.

How gyms fight germs

Being vigilant about cleanliness is essential in the gym, said Lyle Bartelt, who operates the Estrella Mountain Community College Fitness Center in Avondale.

"Our staff does regular cleaning on the equipment and we also have cleaner for participants in the fitness center to use," Bartelt said. "We know fitness centers are higher risk places for staph infections and such."

The college fitness center clearly defines its hygiene policies and provides the cleaner and disposable towels to make sure equipment is

sanitary.

"We even do some education on exactly what staph infections are, to make sure people know it's serious. Most people are aware and concerned at this point," Bartelt said.

Gym users are asked to wear exercise clothing, rather than wearing street clothing on the equipment. After working out, it's important to wash the clothes and shower, Bartelt said.

"We don't usually have a problem if we take precautions," Dr. Po said.

If you don't think your gym appears clean enough, it probably isn't, Dr. Po said. See how well hygiene policies are carried out and enforced for gym users.

"When you go to a gym, check it out. How clean is the place? How good is their policy of cleaning the equipment?" Dr. Po said.

Your health depends on it.

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